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WASHINGTON POST

What Israel fears in Egypt

By Sallai Meridor

Wednesday, February 9, 2011

One might expect that Israelis, who live in the only democracy in the Middle East, would turn out in the squares of Jerusalem and the gardens of Tel Aviv to show solidarity with the demonstrators in Egypt. The protesters, after all, are seeking to overthrow an authoritarian regime.

Israelis, however, have stayed at home, warily following events on TV and the Internet.

It is not a democratic Egypt that Israelis fear but the prospect of Egypt being hijacked by enemies of democracy, of Israel and of the United States. Within every revolution are some who hope to use democratic processes to establish oppressive regimes. This was, to a large extent, what triumphed in Iran in 1979 and what happened in Gaza only five years ago. Many Israelis wonder why it would be any different in Egypt, which is home to the world's most powerful and popular Islamist movement.

Should the government of Hosni Mubarak be replaced by one not truly committed to freedom and peace, the consequences for Israel could be devastating. As Egypt struggles toward an internal balance that appeases all forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood, peace with Israel could be the price of an Egyptian compromise. And the risks are worse if the Brotherhood, an organization deeply hostile to Israel, America and the West, gets to call the shots.

Consider what an Egyptian official once told me: "There is no war without Egypt." From 1948 to 1973, Israel had to fight four wars against coalitions of Arab armies. Since the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, however, there has not been even one war between Israel and Arab states. The lives of many Israelis and Arabs have been saved over the past four decades, and the security burden on Israel's economy has become more bearable. Yet if the peace with Egypt dissolves, the risks to the Jewish state and its citizens cannot be overstated.

The implications for the region could be massive. If Israel's western neighbor turns hostile, where would that leave our eastern neighbor, Jordan? Would it remain at peace with us? What would be the impact on other pro-American regimes? How many weeks, or days, would the new alignment of interests between Israel and most Arab regimes last against an aggressive and nuclear-armed Iran? If there is a negative outcome to the events unfolding in Egypt, the world will be living with a new Middle East, but it will be very different from the one we all aspire to.

Meanwhile, Israelis are uncertain about some positions of the U.S. administration. They remember how, after the 2009 presidential election, the Obama administration refused to support courageous Iranians who demonstrated against the oppressive "hate to America" regime in Tehran. People are understandably puzzled when news reports show an ally of America - even an authoritarian one - abandoned while U.S. rivals are honored with state dinners in Washington, despite their gross violations of human rights. In this highly charged region, Washington's actions are carefully watched. Israelis are looking at the results of U.S. policy in Iraq, the recent loss of Lebanon to Iran and how American pressure on Israel led to a "democratic" takeover of the Palestinian Authority by Hamas terrorists. Israelis live every day with the results of the U.S. administration's blunder that made already-difficult negotiations with the Palestinians impossible.

Israelis have learned the hard way that Israel cannot shape internal developments in our neighboring Arab states. While they wish America could responsibly engage in this process and ensure a positive outcome, they also doubt whether even America can prevent events from proceeding toward, and down, a slippery slope.

It is said, and is possibly true, that worry may be in the Jewish genes. With our history, having paved so many roads with good intentions only to see them lead to destruction, and having experienced how democratic slogans and processes have been abused again and again by murderous dictators, it is hard not to be concerned.

The future of Egypt is uncertain: Is it a hostile Islamist tyranny, using democracy as a fake ladder, or a compromise at Israel's expense that may be about to occur? The fear of war and death is on Israelis' hearts and minds.

But if a real democracy, committed to the values of freedom and peace, were to emerge in Egypt, Israelis would overwhelmingly support it.

The writer was Israel's ambassador to the United States from 2005 to 2009.

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